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SUBJECT: DEMOCRACY OR STABILITY, RUSSIA'S FAUSTIAN BARGAIN

Classified By: Political M/C Alice G. Wells. Reason: 1.4 (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) Recent polling results from the Levada Center have highlighted Russians' satisfaction with the country's economic and political stability and a desire for a continuation of the status quo. The polls have also demonstrated over several years a preference for a strong government hand in the economy and for social over human rights. Dissatisfaction with the services provided by the government, according to the polls, goes hand-in-hand with praise for head of state President Putin, who receives all credit for the good and no blame for the bad that has occurred on his watch. Underlying Putin's two-term honeymoon and paving the way for successor Dmitriy Medvedev, polling data show, is an unstated agreement that has citizens providing largely passive support in exchange for continued economic well-being. End Summary.

Russian Optimism, Belated Warming to Reform

¶2. (SBU) In conversations with Lev Gudkov, Managing Director of the Levada Center; Boris Dubin, Director of Political and Social Studies; and Leonid Sedov, Senior Research Analyst, we discussed political opinion in Russia. Per Gudkov, Russians have adapted to the realities that followed the economic and political reforms of the 1990s. Indeed, according to a November 2007 Levada Center poll, a much larger percentage of the population now has a positive view of these reforms than at any time in the past, with 43 percent of respondents terming them beneficial while 35 percent found them harmful. These results contrasted sharply with answers to the same question in 2000, when the numbers were 14 percent and 76 percent respectively. The proportion of Russians that felt they had personally benefited from the reforms rose from 20 percent in 2000 to 29 percent last year. While this is a small increase, the percentage of those who felt that their families had lost as a result of the reforms declined significantly from 70 percent in 2000 to 41 percent in 2007.

¶3. (C) Gudkov attributed the more positive assessment to increased national income from oil and gas and more modest expectations of Russians after the turmoil of the 1990s. In the early '90s, Russians expected rapid improvement. Those expectations were not met but the disenchantment that followed has been succeeded by some satisfaction with the improved economic circumstances. However, Gudkov and Dubin did not believe that satisfaction was widespread. They attributed recent "optimism" more to the state-controlled media which limits public debate than to economic improvements alone. Gudkov said that the state has put considerable effort into creating the image of broad-based stability and, to a large extent, people have passively accepted the authorities' portrayal of circumstances.

¶4. (C) Muting public activism is the lack of readily available information on "bad-news" stories like crime and imprisonment. The Ministry of Internal Affairs per Gudkov does not make readily available information on crime rates, incarceration rates, costs of incarceration, etc. Detailed data on the state of public health is similarly is similarly unavailable. The government statistics agency Rosstat, Gudkov noted, does a poor job of disseminating information. Only when an issue becomes a government project will information be released, but then it is generally spun to show the government in the best light. Dubin cited as an example recent demographic "successes."

Stability Still Trumps Democracy

¶5. (C) The three specialists believed that the Russian electorate preferred economic and social stability over political activism. Annually since 1998, the Levada Center has asked poll respondents whether order at the expense of democracy would be preferable to democracy at the expense of order. By more than a three to one margin, the respondents have routinely chosen order over democracy. In February 1998, 71 percent of respondents indicated that order is more important while 14 percent indicated that democracy was more important. In November 2007, these numbers were 68 percent and 18 percent respectively, essentially indistinguishable from the responses in 1998. There had been no shift in the population's preference for order in the nine years the survey has been conducted.

¶6. (U) An annual Levada Center poll, which attempted to gauge the ability of simple people to influence government policies has found that from 2000 to 2007 from 20 to 30 percent of respondents indicated that the electorate's ability to influence policies had decreased and about ten percent indicated it had increased, while at least 50 percent indicated it had remained the same. Since the survey did not establish a baseline for change, a report of no change did not necessarily indicate approval of the current situation.

¶7. (U) Data from another Levada Center poll showed that satisfaction with the country's overall circumstances had increased. In 2005, 43 percent of respondents felt that the country was sinking into disorder and anarchy while 22 percent felt the opposite, and seven percent felt that the country was becoming more authoritarian. Eleven percent felt the country was becoming more democratic. Within two years the situation had changed markedly. In 2007, 42 percent felt that order had been established while 14 percent believed that the country was heading for anarchy. The number who felt that the country was becoming more democratic remained stable at 15 percent, while the number who saw creeping authoritarianism almost doubled, to 13 percent.

¶8. (C) These data suggested that political alienation and a certain degree of satisfaction with the current situation co-existed in Russia. Gudkov believed that both the alienated and the satisfied saw no need for elections. The alienated and the satisfied comprised that 51 percent of respondents to a Levada Center poll who felt that the administration needed elections more than the voters. While Dubin and he acknowledged that most voters will in fact go to the polls in the March presidential elections, they described voting as part of a bargain with those in power, which they characterized as: "If you need the elections so much I'll vote, but leave me in peace."

Russians Remain Cautious of Free-Market Institutions

¶9. (U) Data from the Levada Center have demonstrated continued Russians' continued and increasing satisfaction with their economic circumstances. Annual surveys have shown Russians pleased with the ever-increasing availability of consumer goods. In a November survey, 66 percent of respondents indicated that the choice of food, clothing and

other household products had improved, and less than ten percent indicated that their choices had worsened. These ratings have remained high since the inception of this survey in 2000, with a majority indicating improvement each year.

¶10. (U) Russians have also reported improvements in their financial situation in each successive year. Since 1996, a Levada poll has asked about salaries and pensions. In 1998, a minuscule number of people felt their income had increased since the previous year. Since then, the percentage has increased to about 40 percent and remained at that level, with 44 percent in 2007 reporting that their income had increased. Those who indicated a drop in their income steadily declined, from a high of 68 percent in 1998 to 15 percent in 2007. About one-third each year reported no significant change.

¶11. (U) In annual surveys, Russians have reported ever greater opportunities to earn a good income. Since 2000, the percent of respondents indicating their opportunities for a good salary had increased over the past year doubled from 18 to 39 percent. In 2007, for the first time, this percentage exceeded the percentage of respondents indicating their opportunities had decreased: only 28 percent saw their prospects worsen in 2007.

Poor Views of Government Services and Security

¶12. (U) On the other hand, despite increased economic satisfaction, Russians believed that government services have steadily deteriorated from 2000 to 2007. Each year since 2000, about 45 percent of respondents have reported that the services received at hospitals and polyclinics have worsened.

While the percentage indicating improvement in these services has increased, in 2007 it was only 18 percent. Similarly, between 30 and 40 percent of respondents have routinely indicated that the work of law-enforcement had worsened, with only about 14 percent indicating improvement in 2007. In both cases, a sizable percentage (30 to 40 percent) of respondents saw no change in government services, although the surveys did not indicate a baseline assessment (good, bad or otherwise).

¶13. Levada polls have also explored respondents' feelings on personal security. In several important areas, respondents reported improvements, while in others they saw their circumstances deteriorate. For example, from 2000 to 2007 40 to 50 percent of respondents reported that personal safety had worsened over the past year compared with less than 10 percent saying it had improved. At the same time, 40 to 50 percent reported each year that ethnic relations had worsened in Russia, while less than 10 percent reported that relations had improved. Between 50 and 60 percent of respondents each year felt that environmental conditions in Russia had worsened over the past year while less than 10 percent felt the situation had improved. The remaining respondents in each case saw no change in the situation.

The Role of Government

¶14. (U) While most Russians feel that local government serves them poorly, the majority feel the government should have a strong role in the economic life of the country. In an early December poll, the Levada Center asked respondents about government ownership of enterprises and agricultural land. By a wide margin, respondents felt that the government should control large industries (73 percent) and large agricultural tracts of land (73 percent). In the same poll, 68 percent of respondents felt that the government should control income levels to assure a certain level of equality.

¶15. (U) In a November poll Russians demonstrated a preference for strong government intervention in the economy. Respondents were asked which economic system appeared more desirable: an economy based on government planning or one based on private ownership and market relations. Since 1998,

the preference has been for a state-planned economy. In 1997, the country was roughly split between the two. However, starting in 1998 and continuing to 2007, roughly half of the respondents preferred a state-planned economy, while about 30 percent preferred a free market economy.

The Difference Between the Government and the Leader

¶16. (C) Gudkov highlighted the rather paradoxical attitudes Russians have towards their government and its leader. When discussing those issues that most closely touch their lives (health care, police, and corruption), Russians are highly critical of government services. However, they continue to hold Putin in high regard, effectively separating him from the state that he heads. Gudkov noted further that Russians believe that the state should provide for its citizens. Russians believe that provision of health care, education and pensions is more important than free speech (67 percent versus 21 percent) and religious freedom (11 percent) or the right to elect their representatives (10 percent).

¶17. (C) Not surprisingly given the above, Russian citizens did not hold Putin responsible for high prices, for corruption in all sectors of government, or for the difficulties with the militia and traffic police that they experience. In a September poll almost half of the respondents blamed the Russian government for inflation while only 19 percent blamed Putin. Conversely, slightly more than half gave Putin credit for fighting inflation while 27 percent credited the government. Similarly, in an August poll asking respondents who was responsible for recent increases in pensions and salaries, 55 percent said Putin while 27 percent said the government. Gudkov noted that the public viewed many problems as originating with government bureaucrats. At the same time, they saw Putin as someone fighting for their interests when problems arose. Putin's immunity from government shortcoming contributes to his record popularity, which tracked at 80 percent in 2007.

Comment

¶18. (C) Russians have successfully separated President Putin from the often ineffective actions of the government and bureaucracy. Levada Center polls indicate a public that has adjusted easily to "imperial" governance, in which the leader of this government can do little wrong and is perceived to have the best interests of the public at heart. Sedov, Gudkov and Dubin agreed that the current situation was unlikely to change. The public will vote for Medvedev in March not because they know him but because it is believed he will prolong the current stability. Should the government fail to keep its side of the bargain, they thought, the public could re-evaluate its unspoken agreement with the government.

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